

The University of Chicago

THE GROWTH OF LUTHER'S TEACHING OF
JUSTIFICATION: A RE-EXAMINATION OF
THE DEVELOPMENT OF LUTHER'S TEACH-
ING OF JUSTIFICATION FROM A ROMAN
CATHOLIC TO AN EVANGELICAL UNDER-
STANDING

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL IN
CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF
PHILOSOPHY

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III. Luther's Discovery in the Tower

A. Luther's own testimonies

In 1545 Luther wrote a preface to the edition of his works which was published at Wittenberg, telling in it of some of the most important and decisive events of his early life. After having told of the first events in the indulgence process, which began with the publication of the Ninety-five Theses on the 31st of October, 1517, Luther wrote:

And here you see in my case how difficult it is for one to release himself from the errors which have been made firm by the example of the whole world, and which, through a long use have become second nature. How true is the proverb: It is difficult to leave that to which one has become accustomed, and: Habit is second nature. And how true is the word of Augustine: A habit, if it is not resisted, becomes a necessity. At that time I already had through seven years read and taught the holy Scriptures with the greatest diligence, privately and publicly. I knew by heart almost all of them, and, furthermore, had gathered the first-fruits of the knowledge and faith in Christ: namely, that we are justified, not by works, but by faith in Christ (primitias cognitionis et fidei Christi hauseram, scilicet, non operibus, sed fide Christi nos iustos et salvos fieri). Finally--and of that I now speak--I already defended publicly the opinion that the Pope is not the head of the Church by divine right.....(WA. 54, 183f.).

After this Luther told of his negotiations with Karl von Miltitz (in January 1519), of his disputation with Johann Eck at Leipzig (end of June and beginning of July, 1519) and of the miserable death of Tetzel in the same year, and continued then:

Meanwhile, in that year I had turned again to the explanation of the Psalter, confident that after the academic treatment of the epistles of St. Paul to the Romans and Galatians and the epistle to the Hebrews I was better trained. Certainly I had been possessed with an extraordinarily ardent desire to understand Paul in his epistle to the Romans, but had been hindered, not by the lack of ardor in my heart, but by the unique word which is in chapter 1: "The righteousness of God is revealed in it." For I hated that word "righteousness of



God" because through the use and custom of all doctors I had been taught to understand it in the philosophical manner as meaning (as they say) the formal or active righteousness by which God is righteous and punishes sinners and the unjust.¹

But I, though I lived as irreproachable as a monk, felt that I was before God a sinner who had a most restless conscience and could not trust him to be propitiated by my satisfactions. I did not love but actually hated that righteous God who punishes sinners, and if not with silent blasphemy, so certainly with a great murmuring I was indignant with God, saying: is it not enough that the wretched sinners, who already are eternally damned through the original sin and oppressed by all kinds of earthly calamities through the law of Decalogue, even if God would not add woe to woe through the Gospel and also through the Gospel threaten us with his justice and wrath. So I raged with a furious and perplexed conscience, but, at the same time, I was knocking at Paul on that passage, ardently desiring to know what was the meaning of St. Paul.

Day and night I tried to meditate upon the relations of the words, namely, "The righteousness of God is revealed in it, as it is written: 'The righteous shall live by faith.'" Then finally, God having mercy, I began to understand that God's righteousness is that by which a righteous man lives by the gift of God, namely, by faith, and that this sentence that God's righteousness is revealed through the Gospel, is passive, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: "The righteous shall live by faith." Now I felt myself altogether reborn and as thought I had entered Paradise. Then in the same moment the face of the whole Scripture became apparent to me. Then I ran through the Scriptures, as far as my memory possessed it, and collected analogies also in other phrases, as the work of God, i. e., what God works in us, God's power, by which he makes us strong: God's wisdom, by which he makes us wise; God's strength, God's salvation, God's glory.

The more intensely I had before hated the expression "the righteousness of God," the more lovingly I extolled to myself this most pleasant word, and so that passage of Paul was to me the very gate to Paradise. Afterwards I read Augustine's treatise On the Spirit and the Letter where, contrary to my expectation, I found that he also interprets the righteousness of God in a similar way: with which God endues us when he justifies us. And although this was up till this time imperfectly explained, and he does not expound clearly everything concerning imputation, he nevertheless seemed to teach the righteousness of God by which we are justified.

¹"Interim eo anno iam redieram ad Psalterium denuo interpretandum, fretus eo, quod exercitator essem, postquam S. Pauli Epistolas ad Romanos, ad Galatas, et eam, quae est ad Ebraeos, tractassem in scholis. Miro certe ardore captus fueram cognoscendi Pauli in Epistola ad Roman. Sed obstiterat hactenus non frigidus circum praecordia sanguis, sed unicum vocabulum, quod est cap. I: *Justitia Dei* revelatur in illo. Oderam enim vocabulum, istud *Justitia Dei*, quod usu et consuetudine omnium Doctorum doctus eram philosophice intelligere, de iustitia (ut vocant) formali seu activa, quo Deus est iustus, et peccatores iniustosque punit."

Better equipped by these considerations, I began to interpret the Psalms the second time,² and an extensive commentary would have come out of this work, if I had not been faced with a fresh interruption in the following year through the summons of the Emperor Charles V to the Diet held at Worms.

In Luther's Table Talks there are several accounts of the discovery of the true meaning of Rom. 1:17. Although these do not throw much more light upon the event, they add some sidelights to it. We quote here the most important of them:

These words "righteous" and "righteousness of God" (*iustus, iustitia Dei*) were a flash of lightening in my conscience, at the hearing of which I was frightened: If God is righteous, he punishes. But by the grace of God, when I once meditated upon these words in this tower and hypocaustum [heated room]: "the righteous shall live in faith," and "the righteousness of God," there came instantaneously into my mind: If we are to live as righteous by faith, and the righteousness of faith is to be for salvation unto every one who believes, it is not our merit but the mercy of God. In that manner my soul was refreshed. For it is the righteousness of God by which we are justified and saved through Christ. And those words became more pleasant to me. The Holy Spirit enlightened me through this word in this tower (TR. 3, 3232, summer 1532, Cordatus; there are other versions of the same statement, having the same content).

When I first read and sang the Psalm: "Deliver me in thy righteousness," I was always frightened and hated these words: "the righteousness of God," "the work of God," for I believed that God's righteousness meant his severe judgment. Was he, then, to save me according to his severe judgment? Then I should be eternally damned. But God's mercy, God's help, these words I like better. Thanks to God, when I understood the matter and learned that God's righteousness means that righteousness by which he justifies us by the righteousness given as a free gift in Jesus Christ, I understood the grammar, and the Psalter became more according to my taste (TR. 5, 5247, 1540, Mathesius).

For I am not ashamed of the Gospel, etc., for therein is revealed the righteousness of God. This clung to my mind all the time. I could not understand this word otherwise, wherever

²"Postea legebam Augustinum de spiritu et litera, ubi praeter spem offendi, quod et ipse iustitiam Dei similiter interpretatur: qua nos Deus induit, dum nos iustificat. Et quamquam imperfecte hoc adhuc sit dictum ac de imputatione non clare omnia explicet, placuit tamen iustitiam Dei doceri, qua nos iustificemur. "Istis cogitationibus armator factus coepi Psalterium secundo interpretari" (WA. 54, 185f.).

it was in the Scriptures: God's righteousness by which he himself is righteous and judges justly, etc. I tried this hard in myself, stood and knocked, if there might be someone who would open, but there was nobody who had opened. I did not understand what it could mean, until I went on and read: "The righteous shall live by his faith." This sentence is the explanation of that righteousness of God. When I had discovered this, I became so glad, to such an exultation, that there is nothing higher. And so the road was open for me when I read in the Psalms: "Deliver me in thy righteousness." Previously I had been frightened by the Psalms and the Scriptures and hated them because there was the righteousness of God, namely, that by which he is righteous and judges us according to our sins, not that by which he accepts us and justifies. The whole Bible stood like a wall, until I understood when I read: "The righteous shall live by faith." From this I understood that the righteousness is the mercy of God by which he himself justifies us by giving his grace (TR. 5, 5553, 1542-43, Heydenreych).

More important than these statements is a story of Luther in which he spoke of the same event from a different point of view:

I was long astray, I did not know what was my inner condition. It is true, I knew something, but I did not know, nevertheless, what it might be until I came to the passage Rom. 1, "The righteous shall live by faith." That helped me. Then I saw what was the righteousness of which Paul speaks: in the text there stood "righteousness," then I arranged the abstract and concrete together and became sure of my cause, learned to distinguish between the righteousness of the law and of the Gospel. Before that I lacked nothing except that I did not make any distinction between the law and the Gospel, considering it all the same and said that Christ did not differ from Moses save as to time and perfection. But when I found the distinction, that the law and the Gospel are two different things, then I broke through.³

B. The meaning of Luther's discovery in the tower

Modern Luther-research has made energetic efforts to solve

³"Ich war lang irre, wusste nicht wie ich drinnen war.

Ich wusste wol etwas, oder (saber) wusste doch nichts, was es ware, bis so lang das ich uber den locum ad Rom. 1. kam: iustus ex fide vivet. Der halff mir. Da sah ich, von welcher iustitia Paulus redet: Da stand zuvor im text iustitia, da reumet ich das abstractum und concretum zusammen und wurde meiner sachen gewiss, lernet inter iustitiam legis und evangelii discernieren. Zuvor mangelt mir nichts, denn das ich kein discrimen inter legem et evangelium machet, hielt es alles vor eins et dicebam, Christum a Mose non differre nisi tempore et perfectione. Aber so ich das discrimen fande, quod aliud esset lex, aliud evangelium, da riss ich herdurch." (TR. 5, 5518).

the problem of the date of Luther's discovery in the tower. There has been, however, a serious shortcoming in these endeavors: no real and serious effort has been ever made to find out the meaning and content of this discovery.⁴ Usually it has been assumed that Luther's problem was simply this: whether the "righteousness of God" was his retributive justice which gave each one according to his deserts, or was it His grace by which He made righteous men who in themselves were sinners.

The problem was not simple. There were in Catholicism Christian elements which agreed--at least apparently--with the Evangelical conception that Luther discovered. It is necessary to distinguish these elements from those which were new and characteristic of the Evangelical insight that Luther found.⁵ It is true that at the first glance Luther's words suggest the above-mentioned conception--that it was a question of the difference between God's retributive and gracious righteousness--but the first impressions are often erroneous. We remember that Luther's words regarding the help of Staupitz seemed to suggest that Staupitz led him to give up the doctrine of predestination and that there was nothing specifically new in Staupitz's counsels concerning repentance. But a closer investigation of the teachings of Staupitz made it clear that Luther's words of his counsels had more meaning than they seemed to have at the first look. So it is here

⁴Iwand, op. cit., p. 33, footnote, says: "We think that the dating of the tower-experience must remain wavering as long as it is not clearly determined wherein it consisted as to its content."

⁵Hermelink, "Die neuere Lutherdeutung," op. cit., p. 149, says: "The content (das inhaltliche Element) of the basic insight of the Reformation needs to be studied more thoroughly than it has been hitherto; this insight needs to be distinguished from the general Christian element found in Catholicism (das Gemeinchristliche im Katholizismus)."

also: we cannot take the words as they appear to us, superficially, but we must try to find out what Luther meant by them.

The first thing we have to consider is what was the prevailing explanation of the words in Rom. 1:17 prior to Luther's discovery.

At the present time it is an established fact that the teachers of the Church who explained Rom. 1:17 interpreted it as meaning, not the "active" justice of God by which He punished the sinners and the unjust, but, as Augustine explained it, the grace by which God endued and made man righteous (iustitia dei, non qua deus iustus est, sed qua induit hominem; iustitia dei dicitur, quod impertiendo eam iustos facit, iustitia dei non qua ipse iustus est, sed qua nos ab eo iusti facti).⁶ Ambrosiaster, who was--along with Augustine--one of the most influential exegetes of the Church--did not explain it as plainly as imparted righteousness, but he also said that it meant that God mercifully received them who fled to Him as refugees, and was righteous in keeping his promises.⁷ Later on the usual way to interpret Paul was, in one way or another, to combine these interpretations.⁸

⁶ Augustine, De spiritu et littera, cc. 9 and 11; Migne, op. cit., vol. 44, p. 309.

⁷ Migne, op. cit., vol. 17, pp. 59B, 79B.

⁸ In 1905 the Roman Catholic H. Denifle published a large study, Luther und Luthertum. Ergänzungen, 1. Quellenbelege. Die abendländischen Schriftausleger bis Luther über iustitia Dei (Rom. 1, 17) und iustificatio, on the question whether the teachers of the Church explained the words iustitia Dei in Rom. 1:17 as His punishing justice. He showed that out of "sixty teachers of the Latin Church" all interpreted these words as meaning "the righteousness through which we become righteous, God's undeserved justifying grace, the real justification of men which they get through faith." Op. cit., I, 2d ed., p. 395.

Karl Holl restudied the problem and presented his results in his article "Die iustitia dei in der vorlutherischen Bibelauslegung des Abendlandes," Festgabe zu A. von Harnack, 1921, pp. 73-92 (the same in Holl, Gesammelte Aufsätze III, 177-181). Although Holl criticized Denifle at some points he also acknowledged that

Although it is quite probable that not very many of these exegetical works were available to Luther, he must have known this interpretation at a comparatively early phase of his life in the monastery.⁹ In fact, in all his writings from the very earliest period of his life in the monastery Luther presented this Augustinian interpretation.¹⁰

What conclusion should we draw from this fact? Should we assume, as some scholars do, that Luther made a mistake?

Before we take refuge in such an "emergency exit" we must seek some other possible solutions. In reality, we believe, this very fact that from the very earliest times Luther knew the explanation that the "righteousness of God" in Rom. 1:17 meant the righteousness by which God made men righteous, gives a clue for the right interpretation.

When Luther wrote his "great testimony" of his development in 1545 and when he told of it in his table talks, he had possessed for a long time his Evangelical insight concerning justification; that is, he had already overcome the Augustinian conception of justification as a gradual healing process through the working of God's grace, to which also the non-imputation of sins belongs as a "supplement." The heart of his conception of justification was (in 1545) that man is righteous before God, not because he has

at the main points Denifle was right as to the exegesis of the Western Church. We base our presentation on the article of Holl.

⁹Loofs, Dogmengeschichte, p. 689, says that Luther knew this interpretation already before his journey to Rome (1510-11) when he explained Lombard's Sentences, where this interpretation was to be found. It was also in Augustine's treatise De Spiritu et Littera, to which Luther referred several time in his marginal notes to Lombard's Sentences, written at this time. Hamel, op. cit., I, 10f.; A. Hardeland, "Der Begriff der justitia passiva bei Luther," Christentum und Wissenschaft, II (1926), p. 63

¹⁰Our further study will give a full substantiation to this proposition.

become such or started to become, but because Christ has "satisfied" for him and in his stead the requirements of God's righteousness and of His law, and God imputes Christ's "good works" to the sinner who puts his trust in Him on the grounds of His promises. True faith is that which takes its refuge in Christ only and does not think that his righteousness is in his becoming righteous through the working of God's grace but only in what Christ has done for him. It is true, God also renews man and "makes" him righteous, or sanctifies him, but this does not belong to justification but to the fruits of it. Luther considered it as a dangerously false conception for one to identify the fruits of justifying faith, or man's renewal, with the justification itself. He saw that such a conception robs man of his peace of conscience or brings him back to a secret self-righteousness or "active" righteousness of works.

We ask: is it possible to think that Luther intended to say at the end of his life (as he had done several times before) that the greatest and most decisive event in his development as a Reformer was the "discovery" of the Augustinian type of justification which he as a Reformer considered false and believed to lead to self-righteousness or loss of the peace of conscience?--in other words, almost the same doctrine as, a short time afterwards, was defined as the official doctrine of the Roman Church? Is it possible to assume that in reality Luther did not understand what was the difference between his own conception and that of the Roman Church, as it was taught by its best teachers, but imagined that he had made a great discovery--which in reality was only the teaching of the Roman Church?

Certainly one could not aver anything more foolish and nonsensical--but yet: that is the contention of almost the whole

Luther-research of our time, while it holds that Luther's "tower-experience" meant only the discovery of the interpretation which was known to almost all the teachers of the Church. It is strange enough that such a conception has been able to become the "result" of the "scientific" Luther-research!¹¹

The only possible interpretation is that it was Luther's intention to say that through his discovery he found the "reformation" insight, and that it was this that made him happy as though he had entered into Paradise and which made him able to expound Scripture in the Evangelical manner.

But is it possible to interpret Luther's words in this manner?

Luther said:

Then I began to understand that God's righteousness is that by which a righteous man lives through the gift of God, namely, by faith and that this sentence that God's righteousness is revealed through the Gospel, is passive, by which the merciful God justifies us by faith, as it is written: The righteous shall live by faith.

The "gift of God" and the "passive righteousness" in the mouth of the mature Luther naturally meant the righteousness of Christ or the "alien," donated righteousness, of which he so often spoke e. g. in his Commentary on Galatians, 1531. His meaning was the same when he said in his table talks that his discovery in the tower opened his eyes to see that in Rom. 1:17 Paul spoke of that righteousness which "is not our merit, but the mercy of God. . . ."

¹¹R. H. Fife, op. cit., pp. 163f., is bold enough to state this common conception of the modern Luther-research "without horns and teeth": what Luther "discovered" in the tower of Wittenberg monastery was no real discovery for many scholars of the Middle Ages taught the same--though not Gabriel Biel. This discovery was no discovery for the theological world, but only for Luther.--Fife's statement may seem to some surprising and strange, but in reality most modern Luther-scholars say the same, though not in so plain and uncovered words.

by which we are justified and saved through Christ," "that righteousness by which he justifies us through the righteousness given as a free gift in Jesus Christ"--"the mercy of God by which He himself justifies us by giving his grace."

This becomes still more evident when we consider Luther's words in which he states that in his "tower-experience" he learned to make a right distinction between the law and the Gospel. In saying this he naturally meant: such a distinction as he made in his mature period, the distinction that he set against the confusion of the law and the Gospel in the Augustinian-Catholic doctrine of justification ("that Christ did not differ from Moses except as to time and perfection. But when I found the distinction that the law and the Gospel are two different things, then I broke through").

It is altogether impossible to explain these statements as referring to the Augustinian view according to which justification means that God works through his Spirit a new will in man so that he begins to fulfil the law--a view that Luther regarded wrong at the time when he expressed these words.

An additional confirmation of this interpretation of Luther's words is found in his statement concerning Augustine: "Although. . . . he does not clearly expound everything concerning imputation, he nevertheless seemed to teach the righteousness of God by which we are justified." These words show that in Luther's discovery it was a question of imputation, and that, in Luther's view, the lack of clearness in Augustine's presentation was at this very point. It was this that Luther had not understood before--although he, of course, knew something of imputation, namely, the Augustinian sense of this word--and only now the light dawned in his mind that we are justified by this imputed righteousness of

Christ.

It was this discovery that according to the teaching of Paul and of the entire Scripture the sinful man is righteous only and entirely through the righteousness of Christ which is revealed and promised to him through the Gospel, that made him so exceedingly happy. He did not need to look to his renewal and his progress in holiness for his justification before God but he could put his whole reliance upon the finished work and righteousness of Christ.

Heretofore he had been in the bonds of a secret "active" righteousness: he had had the view that man had to become "actively" righteous in order to be able to stand before God, and that God judged him according to the quality of his person and behavior; for, as we have seen, in the Augustinian-Catholic doctrine of justification man's righteousness was essentially "active," the active fulfilment of the law in faith and love. God's righteousness or justice also was "active" according to this view: God's justifying judgment was "analytical," for he "reputed" righteous them who had become righteous by the working of his grace and who therefore in reality had that innocence and goodness which the law required.¹²

¹²There has been some discussion among Luther-scholars concerning the expression justitia Dei passiva and activa. In 1911 Fr. Loofs wrote of it his article "Justitia Dei passiva in Luthers Anfängen," Theologische Studien und Kritiken, pp. 461ff., holding that in the first period of Luther's development the "passive justification of God" was understood by him differently from his later conception: it was something that man gave to God in acknowledging him righteous in his words, by condemning himself as a sinner (this interpretation was based on Ps. 51:6 and Rom. 3:4). O. Scheel, "Die justitia passiva in Luthers reformatorischer Rechtfertigungslehre," Festschrift zum 70. Geburtstage von Theodor Brieger, 1912, pp. 93ff., criticized Loofs in some points but did not present much decisively new. Loofs answered to Scheel's criticism in his essay, "Der articulus stantis et cadentis ecclesiae," 1917, and defended in all main points his propositions of 1911. Scheel answered briefly in his Martin Luther II, 584.

To be sure, Augustine and the Roman Church--its best teachers--taught that this righteousness of the heart and life was the effect of God's working in man, who was sinful and helpless in himself.¹³

The most sincere people, nevertheless, could not but anxiously look at the progress of their becoming righteous, and judge according to it whether there was for them any hope of inheriting eternal life. If they found that there was some real progress in their sanctification, they were able to believe in their own salvation--but then they had already fallen into the pit of self-righteousness; if they discovered no such progress in themselves, it was difficult to them to believe that they could be saved.

footnote 2, asserting his former view but giving Loofs the acknowledgement that he had clearly shown the difference between the Lutheran and Catholic, and especially the Augustinian, doctrine of justification.--A. Hardeland presented a new study of the question in his *op. cit.*, (1926), which, however, was not very enlightening, because he took the problem from a too narrow point of view and did not make any clear distinction between Luther's pre-reformation and reformation teachings.

¹³Holl, *Gesammelte Aufsätze* I, 95, said that the Roman Church also taught that justification, the habitual grace, was God's free gift and work. Nominalism stressed this by basing man's new position entirely on God's arbitrary acceptance. It was also emphasized that the evangelical righteousness is a different thing from the philosophical one, and that man was to be righteous before he could act righteously; philosophy taught that man became righteous by acting righteously. Even in Scholasticism justification meant the establishment of a new relationship between God and man. Justification was called gratia gratum faciens, grace which made pleasing to God: the person who got it became gratus, pleasing, acceptable, before God.

This shows that there were evangelical elements in the Catholic teaching. But it is evident that Holl was not able to see to the bottom of the problem when he said that the difference between the conceptions of Luther and Scholasticism was--except that in the latter the habitus was understood as something half-material--that the gratia gratum faciens was not taught to be an absolutely free work of God, but there were put conditions for getting it (to be sure, Thomas opposed this, but generally his opinion was not taken heed of): the prerequisite for the impartation of grace was that one did what was in his power (facere quod in se est and meritum de congruo). Grace was thus made somewhat "merited." Furthermore the new relation to God given with the gratia gratum faciens was nothing final, but the final acceptance of God was to be acquired with merits, good works done in the state of grace.

Vogelsang is right in saying that "even when Augustine called it (sc. iustitia Dei) the righteousness which is given us as a gift, it kindled just then the deepest affliction in Luther's heart, because he did not find in himself this donated real righteousness and goodness (reale Recht-und Gut-sein)."¹⁴

As long as Luther had the conception that justification before God and the righteousness required of man was the "active" goodness and innocence of man, worked by the infused grace, and that God judged man according to his real condition, he had no true and lasting peace in his heart. The deeper his knowledge and realization of his own sinfulness became, the more tribulations the Augustinian doctrine of justification caused him. It is true, Staupitz had helped him to believe in the forgiveness of his sins

There have been in the Roman Church a number of men who have not approved of the conception that there are any merits before the reception of grace (and even the official teaching of that Church does not approve of such a view). There have also been many who have taught the life in grace, or sanctification, in about the same way as Augustine understood it. Although the Jesuits have been the most powerful opponents of this more evangelical trend in the teaching of the Roman Church, they have not been able to extinguish it altogether.

It is evident that Holl did not understand the basic difference between the Roman Catholic and Lutheran conceptions of justification. This was caused by his assumption that Luther's teaching in his lectures on Romans 1515-16 was his reformation doctrine--while in reality it still was Catholic, though in a somewhat improved form, as we shall see later.

¹⁴Vogelsang, op. cit., pp. 47f.--Strange enough, Vogelsang does not use this fine insight in his interpretation of Luther's words on his discovery but explains them according to the prevalent conception that Luther found only the Augustinian view (of course Vogelsang does not use this name) of justification.--Holl says about the same as Vogelsang in the before mentioned article "Die iustitia dei passive. . . ." (p. 91): "It may sound quite comforting when one considers that God gives man the justifying grace in baptism and that this makes him able to do the supernatural works, on the grounds of which he acquires admission to eternal life. But if one, like he [Luther] attained the insight that he cannot truly acquire any such good works? Then he saw such a iustitia dei only as a retributive one."--Holl did not see, however, that the result was the same if justification was understood as a gradual process of becoming righteous.

in Christ, but he did not realize that by this very fact (that he thus possessed the forgiveness of sins) he also was justified before God. He was not able to identify the forgiveness of sins and justification; consequently the thought that he did not yet have that righteousness which availed before God--except a tiny beginning of it--partly destroyed the peace which he had found in the forgiveness of sins.

The result and conclusion of these inner struggles was the "discovery" of the Pauline (and reformation) insight that the righteousness of God and Christ is the donated and imputed, perfectly gratuitous, grace, or the adoption of the sinner into the childhood of God on the basis of Christ's "merits" alone.

In the above mentioned table talk of 1542/43, preserved by Heydenreych, Luther said that he did not make any distinction between Moses and Christ except "in time and perfection" (tempore et perfectione). This fits well to the Augustinian and Catholic view even in its best form: the Gospel helped man to fulfil what the law required. Righteousness was the same in both, namely, the fulfilment of the law in faith and love. It was this view which caused anguish to Luther's soul--and it was the discovery that the righteousness of the Gospel was not man's fulfilment of the law (not even the fulfilment made possible by grace) but Christ's perfect fulfilment which was given to the sinner as an undeserved gift; it was this insight that filled Luther's heart with such a great joy and feeling of liberation that it was as though he had entered into Paradise.

In the first sermon of his Church Postil (written in 1521, WA. 10, I, 2, 35ff.) Luther treated the question of the righteousness of God, connecting his presentation closely to those Bible passages the true meaning of which he found in his "tower-experience"

(Rom. 1:17 and Ps. 31:2). He first explained that the word "righteousness" did not mean God's severe justice but rather his goodness and kindness, as it signified also in speaking of men. Then he continued:

Take carefully this passage in order that, wherever you find in the Scriptures the word: God's righteousness, you may not understand by it the essential inner righteousness of God (selbwesendenn, substantiali, ynnenlichen gerechtigkeit gottis), as the papists, and even many of the fathers have done through error; otherwise you will be terrified by it. But know that according to the usage of Scripture it means the grace and mercy of God which is poured into us through Christ (die ausgegossene gnad und barmhertzigkeit gottis durch Christum ynn uns) and by which we are reckoned pious and righteous before him (davon wyr fur yhm frum und gerecht werden geacht, reputamur); it is called God's righteousness or piety because not we but God works it in us by grace, as also God's work, God's wisdom, God's power, God's word, God's mouth is called that which he works and speaks in us. St. Paul proves all this clearly in Rom. 1: 'I am not ashamed of the Gospel: for it is the power of God (namely, which works in us and strengthens us) unto salvation to everyone that believeth. For therein is revealed the righteousness of God, as it is written: The righteous shall live by his faith.' Here you see that he speaks of the righteousness of faith, and it is that which he calls the righteousness of God that is proclaimed in the Gospel, because the Gospel teaches nothing else than this: he who believes has grace and is righteous before God and will be eternally saved. In the same manner you must understand Ps. 30 31:2, 'Deliver me in thy righteousness,' that is, by thy grace which makes me pious and righteous (frum und rechtmacht). . . .

A little later Luther said that

we do not accept Christ by faith as a gift only but also for an example through love toward our neighbor, whom we should serve and to whom we should do good even as Christ has done to us. Faith brings Christ to you with all his goods. Love gives you to your neighbor with all your goods. . . .

Later in the same sermon (p. 42, 12) Luther said that

to justify and save brings with it so much that He redeems them from sin, death, and hell, and does not do this to his friends alone but also to his enemies, yea, only to the enemies. . . . He gives up everything that he has that he may make void their sins and conquer death and hell, and that he may justify and save them (sie rechtfertige und selig mache). . . .

(P. 43, 3:) He goes into (ynn) our sin and death and for us conquers sin and death and hell, so that henceforth all who believe in him and call upon his name shall be righteous and saved, without sin and death, and eternally have a good, joyful, confident, and happy conscience. . . .

(P. 44, 10:) Take care that you do not do anything pertaining to your sin, death, and hell; for here you can accomplish

nothing, your good works are nothing, you must let another work; such works belong to Christ himself. . . .

(P. 45, 7:) You should do good works, but you should not put your confidence in them but in the works of Christ. . . .

(P. 53, 7:) He commands to preach in his name the Gospel in which grace and remission of all sins is proclaimed, and the truth that He has filled the law for us; then the heart becomes free from the bonds of his conscience, and grace comes over him making his heart and inner man free and glad, willing, and joyful to do and leave all things.

This sermon is like an explanation of Luther's story of his "tower-experience," especially of its references to the "righteousness of God." The sermon is of a special value because it is from the first years of the Reformation movement. Even the words which Luther used in this sermon were quite similar to those in his preface of 1545. We call attention to the chief points in it:

1. The word righteousness, iustitia, does not mean God's severe justice but his mercy and goodness.
2. This righteousness is the undeserved gift of God which before God justifies men who in themselves are only sinners. Justification is thus entirely a work of God through Christ.
3. This righteousness is revealed and preached in the Gospel and appropriated through faith.
4. Our salvation or deliverance from sin, death, and hell, our righteousness, and peace of conscience is in what Christ has done for us [cf. also p. 40, 27: "Christ has done and fulfilled all for you, (alles für dich than und ausgerichtet) think only that you may more and more bring him to yourself and strengthen such a faith"]. We should put our confidence and trust only and entirely in Christ's works for us. He has borne our sins, and all who believe in him are righteous and saved, "without sin."

Although Luther used terminology which sometimes seems to suggest the Augustinian conception of justification, his further explanations show that this was not his meaning, but in justification all emphasis was in what Christ has done for us. Faith is the

laying hold of Christ and of His works for us, and through His merits we already are righteous and saved. There is not to be found the slightest reference to the view that justification was a gradual change or process of renewal in man. The words "without sin" make such an interpretation impossible, for man can be said to be without sin only imputatively, when God reckons or regards him righteous. With respect to the righteousness of life he is never "without sin."

The same is also seen in the fact that Luther made a clear distinction between Christ as a gift and Christ as our example. In the former sense we possess him entirely, and he is our righteousness.

As we have seen, Luther used the same expression--Christ as gift and example--also in his disputations, denoting with these words the same distinction as with the words grace (gratia)--gift (donum), imputatively--effectively, justification--renewal, etc.

It is apparent that Luther remembered his "tower-experience" when he spoke of Rom. 1:17 and Ps. 31:2. His description of the "papist" view of the righteousness of God shows that he was at this time well aware of the difference between his interpretation and that of the Roman Church. This difference could not primarily be in the insight that the word righteousness means here (Rom. 1:17 and Ps. 31:2) the same as grace, since most Catholic teachers explained these words so, but it was rather in the nature of righteousness which this word represented.

The analogies, like God's power, wisdom, etc., also remind one of the words in Luther's accounts concerning his "tower-experience."

Although Luther did not speak in this sermon of the distinction between the law and the Gospel, it is implied in the words

that justification has its basis in the fact that "Christ has fulfilled the law for us"; therefore, justification means that we are reckoned (geacht, reputamur) righteous on the grounds of this work of Christ, not because we have begun to fulfil the law through the renewing grace of God. To be sure, Christ gives us power to follow his example, but this is the second gift of God which belongs to the fruits of justifying faith, not to justification itself.

In his preface of 1545 Luther said that before his discovery of the true meaning of Rom. 1:17 and Ps. 31:2 he had already "gathered the first-fruits of the knowledge and faith in Christ, namely, that we become righteous and saved, not through works, but through faith in Christ"; there was only one word that caused difficulties to him, namely, the word iustitia Dei. The same is the thought in the table talk of 1542/43: "I knew something, but I did not know, nevertheless, what it was until I came to the passage Rom. 1, 'The righteous shall live by faith.' That helped me. Then I saw what was the righteousness of which Paul speaks." Before that he "lacked nothing," except that he did not know the true distinction between the law and the Gospel. Through these words of Paul he came to understand this distinction, and then he "broke through." This, too, indicates that the discovery was not the beginning but the relative end of Luther's development. He knew--in the Augustinian sense--that man is justified and saved, not through works, but through faith in Christ; but the discovery of the true meaning of Rom. 1:17 opened to him the final, Evangelical idea of justification.

We gather together the results of our study of Luther's own testimonies of his discovery in the tower of the Wittenberg monastery:

1. It was the discovery of the full reformation insight into justification as the imputation of the blessings of Christ's atoning work and of his righteousness to an unworthy sinner; Luther's eyes were now opened to see that justification is not a change in man but a gracious declaration of God by which He pronounces righteous one who is not that in himself.

2. The "Lutheran" distinction between the law and the Gospel was the content of the discovery seen from another point of view.

3. It was not Luther's "conversion," or coming to faith, but rather the final exegetical-religious discovery of the evangelical way of salvation. We say: exegetical-religious, because it was not only a scientific discovery of the true meaning of the teaching of Scripture at this point, neither was it a personal experience alone, but it was both: it was an exegetical discovery that was at the same time an answer to a deep personal spiritual quest, which found in it what it longed for. Consequently it meant also the attainment of deeper personal certainty of salvation, or justification, before God that he had had before.

VI. Summary and Conclusion

There were two great crises in Luther's life after his entering into the monastery. The first was his conversion or his coming to a personal faith in the forgiveness of sins in Christ. This crisis took place in 1512, probably at the end of October or in November. The central issue in it was how to attain to a certainty of the forgiving grace of God, or how to be sure that God truly forgave his sins when absolution was declared to him. His false conceptions of repentance, absolution, and predestination were great obstacles at this point, and a further stumbling block was the traditional unevangelical way of pronouncing absolution according to monastic practice. The counsels of Staupitz helped Luther to get the right understanding of these questions, and so he was able to appropriate the assurance of forgiveness of sins pronounced by Staupitz. Thus "the light of the Gospel began to shine" into his heart, and he "gathered the first-fruits of faith and the knowledge of Christ," as he related later. Inseparably associated with the influence of Staupitz was that of Augustine, Bernhard, and Mysticism, from which Staupitz too had received powerful influences.

Since 1512 Luther had a saving faith; but his conception of justification was not yet the same as in his mature period. In this phase of his development Luther understood justification as a gradually advancing process of religious and moral renewal, or healing of the human nature from the corruption of sin. Non-imputation of sins for Christ's sake was a temporary supplement to this process of healing, that is, non-reckoning of remaining sins. It is true, Luther sometimes said, as did Augustine, that

this non-imputation made up the greater part of justification, since the factual righteousness of the believer was merely a tiny beginning in the earthly life.

This period, which lasted from the late fall of 1512 to the late fall of 1518, may be called the period of the daybreak of the Reformation. The first rays of the sun of grace and righteousness were shining into the heart of Luther, but the full light of the Evangelical insight into justification had not yet dawned. He had so much light that it was about to break the frames of the Roman Church--as had been the case also with Wiclif and Huss, who had had about as much light as Luther in this phase of his development, but who had not known the Evangelical doctrine of justification. During this period Luther fought against such abuses of the Church as fell within the sphere of the doctrines in which he already had attained--or almost attained--the Evangelical insight, principally the doctrine of repentance.

The second great crisis in Luther's development was his "tower-experience" at the end of the year 1518. In it he found the Evangelical or reformation insight into justification. Two groups of historical documents give evidence of this great change: (1) Luther's Preface to his works, written in 1545, and statements in his table talks of different dates; (2) Luther's lectures and writings. The first group of these documents contains Luther's accounts on the nature and time of this discovery. The second group contains the documents which show what was Luther's conception of justification in the early period of his life. Both groups of documents give, each in their own way, unmistakable evidence of the fact that Luther discovered his reformation concept of justification by the end of the year 1518. From this time on the Reformation movement began in its deepest meaning, and its watchword came to be the justification by grace, by God's

Gracious imputation, appropriated through faith. This watchword was not known before the year 1519. Closely connected with the discovery of the true meaning of Rom. 1:17 was the rejection of the fourfold Scripture sense, as its prerequisite, and the rejection of Mysticism, as its consequence.

Luther's discovery in the tower did not mean that he gave up his old views altogether. It was impossible to do so, for he had had some light already before his discovery, and many of his pre-reformation conceptions were truly scriptural. To the end of his life he continued to teach that grace is bestowed only upon the humble and the contrite in heart; that even the justified children of God are sinful in themselves; therefore their struggle against sin and the gradual putting to death of the flesh must be carried on till the end of the earthly life. These beliefs, as well as the conviction that man is wholly dependent on God's grace for salvation, belonged to Luther's fundamental insights throughout his life. He always agreed with Augustine in the interpretation of Rom. 7 (and of the similar passage Gal. 5:16ff.); namely, that Paul was speaking here as believer. As a consequence of these carry-overs there are many similar or almost similar statements in Luther's earlier and later writings.

The basic difference between Luther's pre-reformation and his reformation doctrine of salvation was in the conception of the nature and essence of justification. In his "tower-experience" his eyes were opened to see that according to Scripture, and particularly Paul, justification by faith is not a gradual process of renewal or becoming righteous. It is rather the imputative bestowal of the righteousness of Christ. God justifies the sinner by forgiving his sins and reckoning him innocent and blameless for the sake of the atoning work of Christ. God pronounces this acquitting

judgment in the Gospel promises, proclaimed by the ministry of reconciliation. Man receives the divine gift thus promised and offered by faith. The foundation of justification and the object of the believer's fiducial trust is not what God has done and does in him, but what Christ has done for him.

When man is converted and becomes a believer, he receives at the same time the Holy Spirit to dwell in his heart. Thus he is renewed as to his heart and life, although this renewal or sanctification does not reach its perfection in a moment. It is a continuing process of growth in the knowledge of God and Christ and in the holiness of life, by the operation of the indwelling Spirit.

* * *

Thus, Luther did not become a Reformer primarily through conversion or personal coming to faith, though this was a necessary prerequisite to it. Only a believer could be a Reformer of the Church; but most believers are not Reformers. If Luther had not had a "tower-experience" in his life, he would have become a "reformerist"--like Wiclif, Huss, Savonarola, etc.--but never a Reformer.

Neither did Luther become a Reformer through a "religious experience"--a sort of supernatural-mystical revelation that he then proclaimed to the world; or through the discovery of a new religious "idea," the prophet of which he then became. There have been hundreds of false prophets who have received their "calling" in this manner.

Luther became a Reformer by discovering the true meaning of the written word of God, particularly concerning justification. His discovery in the tower was, to be sure, also a deep religious experience in which he found peace and joy unknown to him previously. What he experienced and felt, however, was not central or primary. The central and main thing was the discovery of the scriptural way of salvation, and particularly of justification.

Luther never wished to proclaim any experiences or religious ideas. He proclaimed that which he believed to be the eternally valid divined truth, revealed by God and recorded in the Scriptures in their simple literal sense. The whole content of Luther's discovery in the tower was thus the insight that, according to the simple literal sense of Scripture, man is justified by God's gracious imputation when he appropriates by faith the Gospel promise of the forgiveness of sins in the blood of Christ.

Luther's discovery of the reformation insight into justification and sanctification contained both principles of the Reformation: (1) that Scripture is the revealed and inspired word of God, and as such it is the only and highest standard and norm of the faith and life of Christians; (2) that Scripture teaches that the sinful man is justified by grace alone, through faith in Christ, when he trustfully lays hold of the Gospel promise and offer of the forgiveness of sins. The former was not the new element of that discovery but rather its prerequisite. The latter was the new insight that Luther discovered, or rediscovered; that is, it was not a new idea--this was Luther's conviction--but the old and original Gospel which was proclaimed by the apostles of Christ but which had been hidden, covered under misconceptions and wrong doctrines. Now the "cover" was removed, and the rediscovered central truth of the original apostolic Christianity again began to spread its saving light, first in the heart of Luther himself, and then, through his ministry, in the hearts and consciences of thousands of others among many nations.

* * *

In a statement, which we have quoted, Luther said that a book which contained thoughts from the period prior to his discovery of the full Gospel was no longer of use in the new age,

when the Gospel was shining in its noontide brightness. These words apply to the whole literary heritage of the "young Luther." It cannot be used side by side with his reformation production. The Lutheran Church has had a right instinct when it has owned as its true spiritual possessions only those writings of Luther which are from the year 1519 on. Almost without exception these only have been used for instruction and edification. The writings from the time prior to 1519 have been mostly forgotten, until the Luther-students of our generation have brought them to daylight. The Church at large has felt that there is a different, strange spirit in the early production of Luther and an unevangelical conception of the Christian faith and life. Only the writings from 1519 on have been considered truly "Lutheran."

Modern Luther-research has largely taken a different stand at this point. In numerous studies of Luther's theology his earlier and later lectures and writings have been used side by side. On the basis of our results we have to regard such a procedure as a serious methodological error, causing much confusion. Since the literary heritage of Luther from the time previous to 1519 is of the pre- and sub-reformation type, no sound Luther-study can use the writings before and after 1518/19 in uncritical mixture. Since a large part of modern Luther-research has committed this error, it is in need of revision.

* * *

Otto wolff said a few years ago that in the modern study of Luther the rediscovery of the full reformation Gospel of the Reformer has not yet taken place. The Luther-research of our time still lives largely in a "pre-reformation" period. Might it be hoped that, as the first World War was followed by the "revival" of the pre-reformation Luther, the second World War may be followed by a "revival" of the full reformation Gospel of Luther--and of Scripture?

WORKS TO WHICH REFERENCE IS MADE IN THE
ESSENTIAL PORTION OF THE DISSERTATION

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